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Whitney Long
Candidate

Jennifer Lucko, PhD
Program Chair

Jennifer Lucko, PhD
First Reader

Kathleen McDougall
Second Reader

Student Perspective on Accessing Accommodations in the General Education Classroom

By

Whitney D. Long

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

May 2019

Abstract

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with disabilities are to be provided accommodations that allow them to access the curriculum in inclusionary classroom. Research shows that many general education teachers are not properly trained in supporting students with disabilities, are provided with limited time and resources to plan differentiated curriculum, and in turn develop poor teacher efficacy and a negative attitude towards the inclusion setting. These challenges indicate that some students may not be accessing the general education curriculum. The limitation with current research is that it fails to gain the student perspective on their ability to access the curriculum in light of these challenges. My research aims to explore the challenges and successes students have experienced as they attempt to access accommodations in their general education classrooms. I employed a qualitative approach, and held both a student focus group with high school students and interviews with successful general education teachers in hopes of identifying the qualities of, and what could be, an effective inclusionary classroom. The findings of my research indicate that students are capable of accessing their accommodations and the attitude of the teacher and their acknowledgement/approval of students accessing IEP accommodations can act as either a wall or a gateway for student self-advocacy. With an open communication channel and a welcoming attitude from the general education teacher, students can help ease the challenges associated with the inclusionary classroom.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my students, both past and present, for it was seeing the joy in your eyes when you felt successful in your classes that inspired me to pursue this topic. Hopefully, this thesis will lead to more of those moments. I'd like to thank my wife for motivating me to begin the process of becoming a teacher (more like starting it for me), and then once again when it was time to complete my master's. Heather, you know how much you mean to me. And I can't forget about my boys! Little do you know, you two inspired me along the way to complete this thesis. I love you guys.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Imagine you were a student who was born with developmental delays that affect your ability to process visual or auditory information. How would you feel if you were unable to complete a test or project in a set amount of time and thus received a poor grade? Having the opportunity to complete that project without penalty, or without having to rush and do sloppy work, sure would be nice, right? Issues with equal opportunity surround us nearly everywhere we go and typically affect people based on race, sex, and age. The context of this study, however, focuses on the equal opportunity within the education system specifically with regard to students with disabilities. In the 1970s the educational system made significant changes to provide avenues for access to students with disabilities through what's called an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Students with an IEP were provided services and accommodations to assist them in accessing the curriculum in their classes. The problem I set out to study was the inability of general education teachers to adequately provide IEP accommodations to students with special needs, thus jeopardizing the student's access to their education.

Statement of Purpose

Research on this topic is abundant and takes into account the challenges teachers undergo to support students with disabilities, different models of providing special education services, the benefits, and negatives of the inclusionary classroom, the effects of knowledge, attitude, and efficacy when it comes to instructing students with disabilities, and the effect of a student's self-determination. Altogether, in one way or another, these factors affect the inclusionary classroom and the ability for students to access their education. Research shows that many general education teachers are not properly trained in supporting students with disabilities, are provided with limited time and resources to plan differentiated curriculum, and in turn develop poor

teacher efficacy and a negative attitude towards the inclusion setting (Glazzard, 2011; Scanlon & Baker, 2012; Swain, Nordness, & Leader-Janssen, 2012). These challenges indicate that some students may not be accessing the general education curriculum, which poses a major problem both morally and legally. Research also shows that students can play an effective role, especially in the high school setting where they should be developing good self-advocacy skills in preparation for post-high school life. Hart and Brehm (2013) found that students who are aware of their disability and have learned self-determination skills improve their academic performance and can self-advocate for their own accommodations.

The commonality among the current research is that researchers have targeted teachers, both in practice and in pre-service training, for their research in hopes of better understanding the problem. The purpose of my research is to account for the student's perspective on their ability to access accommodations in the mainstream setting. Accessing the student perspective can help identify challenges and successes they see and have experienced that ultimately can provide new insights to current research and help improve the inclusionary classroom.

Overview of the Research Design

This study took place at Mountainside High School in California, a relatively large public high school with nearly 2000 students where the population of students is predominantly white and part of middle to upper-class families. The culture at Mountainside High School is significantly influenced by academic achievement as there is a wide variety of Advanced Placement classes students opt to take and where the majority of students are striving to attend four-year universities. As a special education teacher at Mountainside for over five years, I have been afforded the opportunity to conduct research at this site with my own students and colleagues, in hopes to find ways to improve student access to education.

My methodological approach involved a pragmatic worldview where I undertook a phenomenological research design and conducted both a student focus group and three teacher interviews to collect qualitative data necessary to answer my research question. The focus group consisted of eight total 11th and 12th grade students, with mild to moderate disabilities ranging from ADHD to Autism. The students were asked a series of questions geared towards gathering their perspective on access to accommodations in the general education setting. All of these students were students on my special education caseload and are a member of my resource classroom. My close relationship with these students allowed for a comfortable environment for the students to share their experiences. To complement the data collected from the students, as well as the research found in the literature review, I felt the need to hear from a few teachers as well. Therefore, interviews were held with three teachers who have shown great success in working with students with disabilities. Questions for them were geared towards identifying systems and practices in place within their classrooms for supporting students with special needs along with how they came to develop such strong positive attitudes towards inclusion.

Significance of the Study/Research Findings

The findings of my study offer new insights into the provision of IEP accommodations in the inclusionary classroom. To begin, my findings show that students (at least at the high school level) feel as if they should be making the requests for accommodations rather than the teacher automatically applying accommodations all the time. This allows students to make requests on an as-needed basis. As much as the students would like to be independently accessing their accommodations, however, there are challenges that discourage them from doing so. The summary of findings presented below, and more extensively in subsequent chapters, are significant because they offer avenues to revamp the inclusionary classroom and improve student

access to education. What differentiates this research from previous findings, is that the findings are based on the voice of the students themselves.

One of the main challenges that students with disabilities are experiencing is problems related to communication with their general education teacher. Students shared that there is simply a lack of time to meet with their teachers, especially in a confidential manner. Furthermore, students acknowledged that there are times they don't feel comfortable communicating their need for accommodations because they feel as if the teacher is unaware they have an IEP or is unwilling to provide accommodations. The challenges with communication shed light on the importance of collaboration, not so much between teachers, but between teachers and their students, as the complexities and different interpretations of IEPs can lead to confusion in the classroom.

A second major finding is that the attitude a teacher displays, or at least the attitude a student perceives, in the inclusionary classroom is, on the one hand, a significant factor in promoting a comfortable atmosphere for students to access their accommodations or, on the other hand, deterring students to access their accommodations. This finding raises the importance that what teachers do or say in front of the students has a connection to the success of the students. This ties together with the challenges of communication in the classroom as teacher attitude was also a major cause in poor communication. Altogether, teacher attitude and improved communication between teachers and students with disabilities are two factors that must be addressed in order to improve the inclusionary classroom.

Significance of the Study/Research Implication

The findings from this study provide a basis for which educators must make changes to improve access to education for students with disabilities. As educators, we must understand that the students we teach are very different from each other in a number of ways. Providing equal opportunity for every one of our students should not only be a goal for educators due to the requirements in federal law but also because it is morally the right thing to do as we strive to advance equity and social justice in our educational system.

Teachers can make immediate changes in the classroom by acknowledging the students with diagnosed disabilities have a right to their accommodations and work with the students to ensure the student has everything they need to access the curriculum. If the teacher does not have the necessary knowledge to implement accommodations or differentiate the curriculum, they must at least attempt to do so, and consult with the student and colleagues as necessary. The issue at hand is too important and students in this study have shared how limiting their success can be when they are not provided equal access. It is understandable that teachers are burdened by increased workloads and the pressure of helping students achieve the content standards, but even small changes to the classroom can have lasting effects. Building in collaboration time with students with disabilities and displaying a positive attitude towards supporting their special needs not only allows them to better access the curriculum but can also foster the growth of their self-determination skills.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) are entitled to supplementary aids and accommodations in their classes in order to access the curriculum, and it is the responsibility of the IEP team, namely the special education teacher and the general education teacher, to ensure these accommodations are provided. With an increase of students with disabilities being included and learning in the general education classroom, providing accommodations and meeting the needs of these students has proven to be challenging. In the following sections of the literature review, I will explore several factors impacting the provision of accommodations in the general education setting.

In order to better understand the problem, I first take a look at how the evolution of educational law pertaining to students with disabilities has led to the increase of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Next, I explore the inclusionary classroom, the setting where students with disabilities are educated alongside their nondisabled peers. I pay close attention to the positive and negative effects of the inclusionary classroom on students with disabilities as well as the other members of the classroom.

In an inclusionary classroom, the general education teacher is responsible for the education of all students, including those with disabilities, and it is important that teachers have the necessary knowledge, attitudes, and teacher efficacy to meet this need. Thus, in the second section of my literature review I delve into the teacher's knowledge of and attitude towards special education, and the provision of supplementary aids and services within the inclusion model in particular, as these are significant factors that affect the overall efficacy of the teacher and their ability to educate students with disabilities. Lastly, in the third section, I investigate the

role of the student in accessing accommodations. Like the general education teacher, they too are on the frontlines and have a role in accessing their education, especially in high school.

The Inclusionary Classroom

Historical context.

In the 1970s, after years of grassroots efforts and legal battles, the voices of parents and advocates who had been fighting for the educational rights of their children with disabilities were finally heard. The result of their effort was the inclusionary classroom—a mainstream setting where students with disabilities are taught alongside their nondisabled peers with appropriate in-class supports (Reyes, Hutchinson, & Little, 2017). Prior to the 1970s, Americans with disabilities had faced exclusion in education. The accumulation of litigation and movement for the educational rights of students with disabilities progressively gained traction, but it wasn't until the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAH) was passed by Congress where significant change occurred and these students began to receive educational access to the same learning opportunities as their nondisabled peers (Kirby, 2017). At the time of the EAH enactment, roughly four millions kids with disabilities in the US did not receive educational services in school and one million were excluded altogether (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). This federal law guaranteed access to education for all children with disabilities.

Disability law continued to progress and the EAH eventually was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. The IDEA has undergone a few revisions since 1990, most recently the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, but the main purpose of the IDEA and its six core principles remain the same (Turnbull, Huerta, & Stowe, 2009). According to Turnbull et al. (2009), the six core principles embedded in

IDEA that provide a framework for understanding the law are zero reject, nondiscriminatory evaluation, appropriate education, least restrictive environment, procedural due process, and parent participation.

The first principle, and possibly one of the most influential with regard to the inclusionary classroom, is zero reject. As one of the cornerstones of IDEA, this principle holds the idea that no child, regardless of ability, is to be turned away from a free and appropriate public education. The next principle, non-discriminatory evaluation, suggests that schools conduct appropriate evaluations for any student with a suspected disability and administer that evaluation on a non-discriminatory basis (Saleh, n.d.). The third principle, appropriate education, specifically focuses on the child's education through an Individualized Education Program (IEP), where specific services and aids are provided to ensure the child has access to a free and appropriate education. The fourth principle, another cornerstone of IDEA law, mandates that students be educated in the least restrictive environment, or in other words, the general education classroom with nondisabled peers. The fifth principle, procedural due process, highlights the need for a process to be in place for parents to hold schools accountable for their child but also for schools to hold parents accountable. Lastly, the sixth principle, parent participation, focuses on parent and student involvement with all matters regarding the student's education (Turnbull et al., 2009).

Free and appropriate education and least restrictive environment.

Arguably, the two principles of IDEA that have had the biggest impact on the growth of students with disabilities being educated in the general education classrooms are free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and least restrictive environment (LRE). The basis for FAPE and LRE within IDEA is that education was designed to be an inclusive endeavor and

students with disabilities should be included in the general education classrooms to the fullest extent possible (Kirby, 2017). Additionally, under the principle of least restrictive environment, IDEA requires that the first educational placement considered for students with disabilities be the general education classroom (US Department of Education, 2006). There are times, however, when the general education classroom is not the least restrictive environment for a student. As Costley (2013) describes, the LRE is not the regular classroom when the severity of a student's disability prevents them from achieving satisfactory grades and/or progress even with the provision of supplementary aids and services. Nonetheless, the number of students with disabilities being educated in the regular classroom continues to grow. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 62.2% of students with disabilities spend 80% or more of their day in the regular classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Benefits of inclusion.

With the IDEA guidelines FAPE and LRE leading to the growth of students with special needs in the general education or, "inclusive classroom" over the past forty plus years, researchers have turned their attention to analyzing the effects, both positive and negative, of the inclusionary classroom. One of the main advantages of inclusion, which is even mentioned in the IDEA itself, is the social benefit of the inclusionary classroom. Studies have shown that students with disabilities benefit socially with fewer negative labels, reduced stigma, and increased interaction with nondisabled peers (Dupuis et al., 2006). Dupuis et al. (2006) go on to mention that the level of academic achievement for students with disabilities in the inclusionary setting increases as they are more motivated, focused, and successful socially and academically. Furthermore, access to the general education curriculum, as opposed to being educated in a segregated setting opens the door to a multitude of different classes, a more challenging

curriculum, and college preparatory classes (Kirby, 2017). Access to college preparatory classes allows students with disabilities to learn the skills necessary for post-secondary education and careers, whereas exclusion from these classes would impact a student's post-graduation plans (Kirby, 2017).

The benefits of the inclusionary classroom extend to more than just students with disabilities. Research suggests that there are positive attitudinal impacts of inclusion for both students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers (Dupuis et al., 2006). Students without disabilities reported being happier and had a more positive outlook on the classroom when they were aware of the inclusiveness of the setting (Dupuis et al., 2006). Given the nature of the inclusive classroom, where teachers must direct more attention at times to those with disabilities, among other things, researchers hypothesized students without disabilities would have negative attitudes (Szumski, Smogorzewska, & Karwowski, 2017). However, Dupuis et al. (2006) found that the more students without disabilities understood about the environment the less likely they would be affected by any potential inconveniences that an inclusive setting might present. Lastly, research by Scanlon and Baker (2012) identify that there is more than just an attitudinal benefit to an inclusive classroom for students without disabilities. They discovered that inclusive environments have the ability to enhance teacher practices in lesson planning and the structure of the classroom that have an educational benefit to both students with and without disabilities.

Negatives of inclusion.

The benefits of inclusion are extensive, but there are also some noted negative effects the inclusionary model presents. One example mentioned by Szumski et al. (2017) is that some students with disabilities have externalizing behaviors that can cause disruptions in the classroom and disengage others from the lesson. These disruptions require teacher intervention, which

contributes to decreased instructional time. Szumski et al. (2017) also note that students with disabilities may need additional direct instruction from the teacher, which in turn leads to less time teaching other students. Instructional time is critical to student learning, but arguably more so is preparation time. With teachers needing to differentiate and adapt the curriculum for individual student needs, their workload clearly increases. If a teacher is presented with a large percentage of students with disabilities in a classroom, it can cause increased stress on the general education teacher and lead to less work engagement (Szumski et al., 2017).

Authors Kozik, Cooney, Vinciguerra, Gradel and Black (2009) explain that teachers, especially at the secondary level or, high school, face large student caseloads, minimal planning time, and high expectations for student proficiency. Because secondary schools are generally the entryway to college, there is an added pressure placed on teachers given the content-driven nature of high school (Shippen et al., 2011). The high stakes, content-driven nature of high school contributes to the burden on general education teachers who must help all students, including those with disabilities, benefit from the learning environment (Scanlon & Baker, 2012).

Provision of IEP accommodations.

One of the likely reasons why the number of students with disabilities has grown can be attributed to the provision of supplementary aids and services. These aids and services provide students with disabilities the support they need to access the curriculum in the general education setting alongside their nondisabled peers. With services available, the regular classroom has become less restrictive allowing for students with disabilities to spend more of their school day in the mainstream setting. As outlined in the section of IDEA where FAPE is discussed, it is mandated that students with disabilities be provided supplementary aids and services (IDEA,

2004). These supplementary aids and services are developed by the IEP team and are specific to each child's unique needs. Once a year the IEP holds an annual meeting to discuss a student's progress and ensure the aids and services are allowing the student to reach their IEP goals. One widely-used supplementary aid is referred to as an accommodation. As defined by Scanlon and Baker (2012), an accommodation is a minor change in how instruction is delivered without substantially changing curriculum or expectations. To expand further, accommodations remove barriers without changing what a student is expected to learn; thus, they don't lower expectations but simply provide a way for students to access the general education curriculum (Lee, n.d.). For example, providing extra time on tests and assignments is an accommodation that allows students with certain disabilities to process information at a rate conducive to their learning. A few other common accommodations are student access to teacher notes, simplified instructions, and an alternative setting for taking tests.

In addition to accommodations, there are also several special education delivery models geared towards supporting students with IEPs. One of the most frequently implemented models within the inclusive setting is co-teaching. Co-teaching is where both special education and regular education teachers work together to develop curriculum, build-in or implement accommodations, and teach classes (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). This model allows teachers to balance content knowledge with specialized supports (Scanlon & Baker, 2012). There are a few different setups within the co-teaching model as noted by Scruggs et al. (2007), such as team teaching, station teaching, and parallel teaching. The most widely used setup is where the general education teacher instructs the whole class and the special education teacher supports those students who do not understand the instruction. One downside to this specific setup within the co-taught inclusionary classroom is that the special education teacher

can be seen as an aide to the regular education teacher, which in a way discredits and limits a special educator's abilities. Research also indicates that open communication and finding time for collaboration and planning between general education and special education teachers is difficult (Scruggs et al., 2007). While research on the effectiveness of co-teaching is limited, Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, and Mcculley (2012) share that co-teaching does have at least some positive effect on students' academic achievement.

In other school inclusion models, paraprofessionals, or teacher aides in the special education department, also push-in to classes. Whether it is to serve a single student with a disability or support an entire class, the utilization of paraprofessionals has grown over the years and schools are relying more and more on their support of students within the general education setting (Giangreco, Broer, & Suter, 2011). Despite the growth of paraprofessionals in the school system, Giangreco et al. (2011) share that there are risks involved and the use of paraeducators can be counterproductive. They found that many paraprofessionals are too often left on their own and make instructional decisions. This presents a problem as paraprofessionals are often inadequately trained and are not highly qualified teachers (Giangreco et al., 2011).

Some educators will refer to co-teaching as a "push-in" style, given the special education teacher works directly in the general education classroom. A second style/model is the pull-out model where students with disabilities receive specialized instruction away from nondisabled students in a resource room (Rotatori, Bakken, & Obiakor, 2011), whether they leave the regular classroom for a period of time or spend an entire period of their day in a different setting. In the resource room, students with disabilities receive tailored instruction to their specific needs in an environment with fewer distractions (Fernandez & Hynes, 2016). A drawback with the pull out model is that students spend time away from typically developing peers, miss classroom

instruction, and face stigmatization since they are pulled from the general education classroom and/or spend part of their day in a separate classroom (Fernandez & Hynes, 2016). Furthermore, the pull-out method limits communication between general education and special education teachers, which makes it difficult to plan, instruct, and ensure students are progressing (Scanlon & Baker, 2012).

In both the pull-out and push-in methods, the general education teachers are in the position of authority within inclusionary classrooms and make most instructional decisions (Scruggs et al., 2007); because they are also held responsible for the learning of all students in the class, this essentially requires them to be knowledgeable of teaching in inclusive settings (Reyes et al., 2017). However, implementing accommodations in the general education setting can be challenging to general education teachers for many reasons. One of the main challenges is that teachers experience issues with time available during the class period and school day to individualize content or implement daily accommodations for students. Teachers have an extensive list of tasks to complete in a given class period, let alone the school day. The time it takes to instruct and meet the needs of all students and then to break down the lesson, even more, to make it accessible to students with disabilities make the daily challenge even more difficult.

As a result, many teachers have trouble implementing specific accommodations and only implement those that do not disrupt the classroom routine (Polloway, Epstein, & Bursuck, 2003). Dynamics of the classroom allows, demands, and influences the practices teachers adopt. This, in turn, leads to teachers only implementing certain accommodations that are generic as opposed to highly individualized or closely related to academic content (Scanlon & Baker, 2012). For example, teachers may shorten the length requirements of a writing assignment or embed

scaffolds on outlining an essay for all students as opposed to taking these steps only for individual students who have those listed accommodations.

Teacher Knowledge and Attitude toward Inclusionary Classroom

Teacher knowledge.

Kozik et al. (2009) associate the minimal planning time and increased student caseload secondary teachers face as one of the significant challenges to supporting students with disabilities in the inclusionary classroom. In addition, Cook (2002) points out that general education teachers feel they do not have the knowledge, training, or resources to meet the needs of students with special needs in the inclusionary classroom. Cook (2002) also indicates that this is the case in preservice teaching programs as well, where soon-to-be teachers report that their teacher preparation experiences and instructional skills related to inclusion are inadequate. Many pre-service teachers thus go on to graduate from these education programs feeling ill-prepared to teach students with learning difficulties and diverse needs (Glazzard, 2011). This creates a serious problem for students with special needs in these classrooms, and the effects extend beyond providing an adequate education to children. Research has shown that some teachers are even leaving the teaching profession early because they do not feel prepared to meet the demands of the inclusionary classroom (Reyes et al., 2017).

Because of this lack of teacher knowledge, much research has been conducted to identify best practices within teaching preparation and professional development programs. To start, many teacher preparation programs have required that pre-service teachers take a course in special education to prepare them for inclusive settings (Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008).

Building on to this idea of a separate course on special education, Swain, Nordness, and Leader-

Janssen (2012) determined that preservice teachers would benefit most from a course that embeds hands-on experience in the teacher education program. In such a course, preservice teachers could experience inclusionary placements first hand and obtain a realistic view on how to individualize instruction and implement accommodations. Swain et al. (2012) highlight the importance that teachers who provide mentorship to pre-service teachers at these placements must be qualified to model inclusionary practices as this will help prepare teachers for an environment that facilitates inclusion.

In addition to making changes with required classes in preservice training and education, in-service teachers who feel unprepared to meet the needs of the students in the inclusive classroom have shown a desire for professional development (Pindiprolu, Peterson, & Bergloff, 2007). Research indicates that current teachers can benefit from professional development that creates an avenue to learn strategies and facilitate an inclusionary classroom through peer coaching and in-service training (Swain et al., 2012). Reyes et al. (2017) and Costley (2013) specify that faculty want time for ongoing professional development where general and special education teachers could work together and collaborate. The main goal in any professional development is that the content is relevant, collaborative, builds knowledge, and facilitates active and ongoing learning (Blanks, 2013).

School districts and state educational agencies have also observed the need for teachers to have more education in supporting students with disabilities. In 2013, the state of Florida passed a Senate Bill 1108, which required teachers seeking to renew their credential to partake in professional development geared towards educating students with disabilities (Reyes et al., 2017). These advances by school districts to educate teachers and requests for professional development from teachers themselves display how important it is for educators to become

knowledgeable in special education practices. In addition to promoting ongoing professional development in special education practices, it is also important to focus on building a teacher's positive attitude toward educating students with disabilities and their attitude towards the inclusionary classroom in general.

Teacher attitude and efficacy.

The lack of teacher knowledge in special education experience, laws, best practices, etc. has shown to have a negative effect on teacher attitudes toward the inclusionary model (Cook, 2002). This is important to note because a positive attitude towards inclusion, as Cook (2002) describes, is a prerequisite for successful inclusion, and teachers who hold negative attitudes have been shown to use successful inclusive instructional strategies less frequently. This finding is supported by Swain et al. (2012) who discovered that teachers with positive attitudes toward inclusion are more open and able to adjust their instruction and curriculum to meet the range of individual needs of students. The benefit of a positive teacher attitude extends even further, and as noted again by Swain et al. (2012), is contagious to their peers in influencing them to be more inclusive of students with disabilities.

Research shows that a teacher's attitude is closely linked to their knowledge of special education practices. Disability education is one of the most influential variables in changing teacher attitudes toward inclusion (Sharma et al., 2008). If pre-service teachers do not possess the knowledge and skills to implement inclusion appropriately, the students with disabilities in their future classes will have little opportunity to reach desired educational outcomes (Cook, 2002). Sharma et al. (2008) point out the importance of direct contact working with students with disabilities. They found that pre-service teachers with this experience showed an increased level

of positive attitude towards the inclusive setting compared to pre-service teachers with no hands-on field experience.

Another component in the ability of general education teacher to educate those with disabilities is their overall teacher efficacy. An in-service teacher can be highly skilled at educating students with disabilities and have a wonderful attitude towards their inclusion in the general education setting, but the teacher must also believe in their ability to influence student learning (Tschannen-Morana & Hoy, 2001). Teacher efficacy, in the context of this research, can be defined as a teacher's confidence and belief in their ability to facilitate inclusion in the general education setting and promote student learning (Reyes et al., 2017; Swain et al., 2012). The correlation between teacher knowledge, attitude and efficacy are quite strong. As discovered by Weisel and Dror (2006), teachers with strong teaching efficacy are more likely to have better attitudes toward the inclusionary model. Thus, it can be said that teachers with strong teaching efficacy are more likely to implement successful strategies for students with disabilities. This was supported in a study by Sokal and Sharma (2014), who notes that as a teacher's level of confidence in teaching students with disabilities improves, their overall teaching efficacy to instruct and facilitate an inclusive classroom increases as well. Researchers Gebbie, Ceglowski, Taylor and Miels (2012) determined that one way to increase teacher efficacy is not only through professional development on inclusive strategies but also through support from colleagues.

Student Self-Determination

While it can be argued that general education and special education teachers are responsible for the implementation of IEP accommodations, the students themselves play a role as well. At the secondary level, where students are a few short years away from becoming adults and possibly continuing on to college, it is important that students acquire the necessary skills to

become successful, self-determined, independent learners. Current research defines self-determined learners as students who assert themselves, make independent decisions, self-advocate, and take pride in their accomplishments (Hart & Brehm, 2013). Additionally, Hart and Brehm (2013) share that students with proficient self-determination skills are aware of their strengths, weaknesses, needs, and interests. In the inclusionary setting, having the qualities and skills of a self-determined learner allows students with disabilities to advocate for their own learning and utilize their designated accommodations, which as mentioned earlier, were designed to allow access to the academic content. The benefits of having these skills are immediate. Researchers Cho, Wehmeyer, and Kingston (2012) discovered that possessing self-determination skills transfers to increased engagement, classroom involvement, and an overall improvement in academic skills.

The ways in which a student becomes a self-determined learner can vary. Hart and Brehm (2013) advocate for direct instruction in obtaining the skills through their 10-step model which covers areas such as understanding the importance of accommodations and communicating to general education teachers when they would like to access them, to problem-solving if accommodations are not provided. Nolan-Spohn (2016), who highlights that students often times are not aware of the accommodations they are entitled to, takes a more indirect approach and recommends that students begin to take ownership of their education through participating in the IEP process. Her research determined that students in middle school who play a strong role in IEP meetings are better informed about their own disabilities, rights, and accommodations and it leads to improved self-advocacy and self-confidence. Lastly, Scanlon and Baker (2012) discuss the importance of the special education teacher not only teaching these skills explicitly but going as far as to track and assess a student's ability to access their

accommodations. This can include measuring their self-advocacy and communication skills, their knowledge of their accommodations, and how often they make requests. What researchers agree upon, is that learning these skills at an earlier age empowers them to take ownership of their learning and increases their chances of positive outcomes in the future (Hart & Brehm, 2013; Cho, Wehmeyer, & Kingston 2012).

Conclusion

Several studies have focused on the growth of inclusionary classrooms and the obstacles teachers face when asked to provide an adequate education to students with disabilities within these classrooms. While it is clear that there are numerous benefits, both academically and socially, to students with and without disabilities being taught in an inclusionary classroom, it is also clear that limited resources, minimal planning time, increased teacher workloads, and lack of special education knowledge on the part of the general education teacher present significant challenges towards successful inclusion. At the same time, research has shown that a general education teacher's knowledge of special education practice has a strong correlation with their level of teaching efficacy and attitude towards inclusion. When a teacher has solid knowledge and past experiences working with students with special needs, their attitude and overall teacher efficacy are likely to be positive, and together, these three attributes allow for a more successful inclusive environment.

Other research, while limited, shows that students with special needs can also play an effective role in accessing their accommodations, and thus, education. Through increased student involvement in the IEP process and the promotion of self-determination skills, students with disabilities can better understand the implications of their disabilities and how specific strategies and accommodations will support them. At the high school level, learning these skills are

especially important as they enable students to be more successful in post-high school college and career activities and to become contributing members of the community.

Where this research is lacking, however, is in regard to the student perspective on accessing accommodations in the general education classroom. Whether accommodations are teacher provided, accessed by the student themselves, or nonexistent all together, research does not take into account successes and failures of the inclusionary classroom from the lens of a student. All too often it is the adults making decisions and deciding what is best for the students, and in the rare case a student does share their thoughts, what they say can be influenced by the presence of the adults in the room. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore students' knowledge of their accommodations and their perspective on how their accommodations are accessed in general education classrooms.

Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of my research is to collect the perspective of students with mild to moderate disabilities about their access to education in a high school, college preparatory, inclusive classroom. Due to their disability, students are to be provided the accommodations written in their Individualized Education Program (IEP), which allows them to access the same education of their nondisabled peers. In the literature review, it was established that teachers have a challenging time implementing these accommodations for a variety of reasons and I believe the students themselves have a valuable, unaccounted, perspective that can make this process, and the inclusive classroom in general, more effective. Given this gap in research, this study asks the research question:

How can the perspective of students with disabilities contribute to improving the effectiveness of the inclusionary classroom? The following sub-questions will be explored:

1. What are the obstacles students face within the inclusionary classroom that deter them from accessing their accommodations?
2. What are the environments of the classrooms and qualities of teachers that encourage students to independently access their accommodations?
3. How does a student acquire self-determination skills necessary to independently access an adequate education?

Description and Rationale of Research

The approach I used for my research is the pragmatic worldview. As noted by Creswell (2018), researchers following the pragmatic worldview focus on the research problem itself. I

studied a particular problem within our school system today—the provision (or lack thereof) of accommodations to students with disabilities in the general education setting. For this study, I used two separate methods, both of which are qualitative approaches. Given the nature of my research problem and all the stakeholders directly involved, I believe a choice in methods, techniques, and the procedures allowed me to gain the best understanding of the problem (Creswell, 2018).

With a pragmatic worldview as my lens, I utilized a phenomenological and constructive approach to research and held both a focus group with students with disabilities and interviews with teachers. The teachers selected for the research were teachers who have demonstrated success in working with students with disabilities. I felt these students and specific teachers had a wealth of lived experiences to share about the access to/provision of accommodations in the inclusive classroom, the phenomenon of which I studied. Accessing their collective experiences via focus groups and interviews allowed me to make meaning from their lived experiences, which is the purpose of a phenomenological approach (Seidman, 2012). Given the nature of the problem at hand, the context of the situation is something that is difficult to understand through quantitative research. As pointed out by Seidman (2012), interviewing allowed me to put my participants' behavior in context and understand their point of view. My research design also incorporated a constructivist approach as I constructed my findings from my research participants' subjective meanings of their experiences (Creswell, 2018). Using the perspective of the focus group participants and the complementary information from the teachers I was able to pull and piece specific information from the research to construct answers to the research question.

Research Design

Research site and entry into the field.

The research took place at Mountainside High School, a four-year public high school located in a county within California serving many of the county's wealthiest communities. The school has a current enrollment of 1,946 students, making it the largest school in the county by a significant amount. According to the Western Association of Schools and Colleges' (WASC) focus report of 2015 for Mountainside High School, the ethnicity of the student population is 76% white; 7% Asian, 10% Hispanic, 2% African-American and 1% Filipino. Additionally, 7% of students are Special Education, 1% are EL and 5% receive reduced lunches (2015). There is an abundance of resources at Mountainside due in part to the efforts of strong parent and community involvement who raise over \$1,000,000 dollars annually to support athletics, campus beautification, and extracurricular activities (school website).

There is an established culture of academic excellence at Mountainside High School, not only displayed by the GPA of students and school-wide testing statistics but in the hallways and classrooms as well. Mountainside prides itself for offering a rigorous college preparatory program and encourages students to take challenging Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors classes. Mountainside currently offers over twenty AP courses and more than ten Honors courses across multiple subject disciplines. In the 2017-18 school year, close to half the student population (782) was enrolled in one or more AP or Honors class with 88% of those students scoring a 3 or higher on the AP exam. The post-high school plans of the student population further shed light on the academic culture as 96% of students attended college after the 2017 school year, 79% of which were pursuing 4-year colleges (school website).

It can be argued that the academic mindset of the students, the strong involvement of parents, and the affluent nature of the community has a strong effect on the academic rigor teachers place not just in the AP and Honors courses, but the general education curriculum as well. While this is the opinion of the researcher, many non-AP or Honors teachers strive to produce complex, rigorous, college preparatory curriculum, comparable to AP and Honors courses, in order to meet the academic demand of the high achieving students. This impacts the special education population, especially those with mild/moderate disabilities who partake in the general education curriculum. They not only need to navigate the challenges of a disability but do so in a challenging environment.

As a faculty member at Mountainside High School for over five years, I feel my interpretation of the underlying context at this site is well validated. I have been teaching at Mountainside since 2013 as a resource specialist in the special education department, and therefore was able to access this site to conduct research. I currently serve 28 students with mild to moderate disabilities who have an IEP and meet with me once a day in my Academic Workshop class (resource class). I have a strong relationship with the entire faculty and have consistently been able to build a trusting relationship with my students. My relationship with students and faculty made it quite easy to find research participants for my focus group and interviews.

Participants.

I have two categories of participants: students for the focus group and teachers for interviews. For the focus group, I worked with eight students on my special education caseload. The students' diagnosed disabilities were widespread and included students with a specific learning disability, speech and language disorder, Autism, other health impaired (in this case

ADHD), and hearing impairment. A few students in the study have dual diagnoses. Their grade levels included 11th (3), and 12th (5) graders. Their genders included six males and two females. For the teacher interviews, I sought to interview teachers that I felt had a good understanding of educating students with disabilities and experience relative success when implementing student accommodations. I interviewed a total of three teachers—one who is a science teacher, a second who is a social studies teacher, and a third who is a math teacher.

Sampling procedure.

My recruitment plan for my focus group participants was to individually ask several of my students face to face following their Academic Workshop class with me if they were willing to participate in this study. I chose asking face to face as this would allow me to clarify any misunderstandings or questions about the study in real time. The students on my caseload were recruited because I have an established, positive relationship with them and their families, and I was confident they would be comfortable sharing their experiences during the focus group. Once I received verbal assent from the students I sent home an email to their parents seeking written consent from them as well as written assent from the students. Fortunately, all eight students that were asked, agreed to participate.

My recruitment plan for my teacher interviews first involved generating a list of teachers that I felt had been successful in working with students with disabilities. With a goal of interviewing three teachers, I emailed the three teachers at the top of my list requesting an interview. In the initial email to the teachers, I provided a brief description of my research and a brief set of guidelines for the interview (e.g. window of dates I'd interview, length of the interview, assurance of confidentiality, etc.). Once I had three participants identified, all three of which were at the top of my list, I spoke with each teacher in person about the detailed

guidelines of my interview and established an interview time. At this time I also provided a teacher consent page for them to sign.

Methods.

Focus Group: The purpose of the focus group was to gather the collective perspectives of students in order to answer my overarching research question about how to improve the effectiveness of the inclusionary classroom. For the full list of focus group questions, please see Appendix A. I know that students can/should play a major part in accessing their accommodations and need to acquire self-determination skills, which is why some of the questions I asked the students were about their disability, their IEP accommodations, how they access those accommodations in class, and how often they access those accommodations in class. Knowing this information allowed me to help understand what skills are needed by the students to be self-determined and independently seek their accommodations. I also planned to ask students in the focus group questions about the learning environment of their general education classes and their experiences with obstacles they've encountered and/or success stories they've had when accessing accommodations. This information directly answered two of my sub-research questions (i.e. what obstacles deter a student from accessing accommodations in class, and what qualities encourage students to access their accommodations?), which will contribute to answering the overarching question. Data from the focus group included handwritten notes taken during the focus group session and later transferred to a computer, along with an audio recording that was later transcribed using computer software and reviewed for accuracy.

Teacher Interviews: The teacher interviews were purposely designed to be with teachers who I felt have had good experiences/success working with students with disabilities. For a full

list of interview question, please see Appendix B. While my intention was to learn about their means for success they have working with students with disabilities, I began the interview by asking a few introductory questions - one about their background with working with students with special needs and another about challenges they see with the inclusive classroom - in an effort to obtain information that will support research from the literary review along with any emerging themes from the focus group. The main goal of the interviews with teachers was to learn about the successes teachers have had and ask questions that uncover the procedures, systems, strategies, teachers have in place that make accommodations and thus a student's education more accessible in their class. While my overarching research question is to gather the student perspective on what can improve the inclusive classroom, hearing from the teachers of successful inclusive classrooms will support and/or fill in the gaps to help clarify what the students discussed. Data from the teacher interviews will also include handwritten notes taken during the interview sessions and later transferred to a computer, along with audio recordings that were later transcribed using computer software and reviewed for accuracy.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis, as suggested by Creswell (2018), first involved reviewing the data as a whole to identify the general ideas participants were saying and the tone of their ideas. Following the general analysis of both the focus group and interviews, I began the coding process by scanning the transcriptions looking for keywords and phrases. After initial coding and organization, codes were analyzed to identify emerging themes and placed on a concept map. The process of concept mapping allowed me to look at the data holistically and cluster codes together to form integrated themes between the student focus group and teacher interview data. Next, I analyzed the codes and distinguished between expected codes and unexpected codes. For

example, challenges with the inclusionary classroom were predicted to emerge, while findings regarding student desire for more communication was unexpected. The final step in data analysis after locating themes was to circle back to the codes within each theme and pinpoint specific quotes from students and teachers to directly support the identified themes.

Validity and Reliability

I acknowledge that I may have held a bias during data collection and analysis as I have been a teacher at the research site for over five years and have formed relationships with both students and teachers. I work alongside the teacher interviewees and I am the Individualized Education Program case manager for the students in the focus group. Given that I work with the students in the focus group on a daily basis and have a strong relationship with these students, the students may have felt compelled to answer certain questions in ways they felt would appease me and/or I may have unconsciously steered students to respond in certain ways to the questions. Furthermore, since my initial days as a special education teacher at this school, I have always felt that many teachers do not implement accommodations as often as they should be doing, and as a result, many of my students have suffered. It is possible, therefore, that this positionality may have influenced my interpretations of the research findings. At the same time, I am aware of these biases and took steps to collect and analyze the data as objectively possible.

Along with researcher positionality, another major component that affects the reliability and validity of this research is with regard to the sample size and qualities of the research participants. To begin, the small, eight student focus group and three teachers interviews limits the variety of perspective I was able to gain toward the research question and also the reliability of the participants' responses. For example, in some instances, only 1-2 students would agree with the response of another student or share a similar experience. In addition to the small

sample size, the eight students in the focus group were all upperclassmen (11th and 12th grade students), which further limits the variety of perspectives as it leaves out students in lower grades who also partake in the general education setting. Similarly, the teachers were all selected for interviews based on one criteria: they were all successful working with students with disabilities. Due to the narrowed selection in students and teachers, the reliability of the findings may not be as strong as they could have been had there been a greater number/variety of participants.

Chapter 4: Findings

Students at Mountainside High School with disabilities that qualify them for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) partake in the general education curriculum, and thus inclusionary classroom to the fullest extent possible. The percentage of time they spend in the inclusionary classroom is, for the most part, dependent on the severity of their disability and its impact on their access to the curriculum. As discovered in this study, the level of success these students experience in the general education classroom is dependent on a number of factors, but most notably, 1) student determination and their desire to reach their academic goals, and 2) student access to the curriculum. Student access to the curriculum is affected by a number of factors in its own right, including the design/dynamics of the inclusionary classroom and a teacher's ability and willingness to implement accommodations. Findings from this study show that both the student and the general education teacher play critical roles in the success a student experiences and the effectiveness of the inclusionary classroom.

I begin this chapter by first discussing challenges students in the focus group acknowledged with regard to accessing accommodations in their general education classes. I also weave in findings from the general education teachers who were interviewed, as their perspective both complements the challenges discussed by the students and also provides insight into the challenges teachers face themselves in providing accommodations. Next, I review findings that impact one's attitude and efficacy, both the teacher's, with respect to teaching students with special needs, and the student's, with respect to their confidence and ability to learn and be successful. Within this specific subsection, I pay close attention to how factors in the inclusionary classroom and attitudes of teachers can either help or hinder the efficacy of a

student. Lastly, I discuss the importance of communication, and how it supports the student/teacher relationship and thus a more effective inclusionary classroom.

Challenges with Accessing/Providing Accommodations

In the inclusionary classroom, the teacher is typically busy juggling a multitude of tasks, from working hard to ensure the lesson goes smoothly and finishes in time, to ensuring students have what they need to learn and be successful. From the outside looking in, it is a tough job to handle and the time allowed to complete these tasks is often one of the biggest enemies. Likewise, students with disabilities are busy trying to keep pace with the other students and do their best to fit in, which makes it difficult to find some down-time to collaborate with the teacher and receive extra support, or request accommodations in a confidential manner. Both students in the focus group and the teacher interviewees acknowledged that the available time in the school day makes it difficult to provide, or in the student's case, access, what is needed for a student to be successful.

In the teacher interviews, one of the big challenges facing teachers that impacts instructional time is the growing number of students with accommodations in their general education classes. More and more each year they feel that not only does the number of students with IEPs increase in their class, but also students with 504 Plans and General Education Accommodation Plans. When posed with a question about some of the major challenges in the inclusionary classroom, one teacher reported:

The amount of students with accommodations and IEPs, especially here at Mountainside can sometimes become a bit overwhelming. Especially to know who needs what, and when they need it, and how they need it. Fitting that into your normal work schedule, and

planning and grading, and getting everything else done that you need to do. Often times you become inundated and flooded with accommodations and that can be hard to track.

Simply put, the increase in students with disabilities accessing the general education classroom creates a major burden in the eyes of many teachers, as they must now find ways to support these students and implement their, sometimes long list of accommodations. Furthermore, a few of the interviewees mentioned that in addition to providing differentiated instruction and assessment, other areas related to the special education needs of these students, such as attending IEP meetings, collaborating with SPED teachers, etc., also contribute to an increased workload that can be tough to manage.

To combat some of the challenges associated with a growing number of students with individualized accommodations, the teachers also shared a successful approach they have taken within their classrooms. Rather than individualizing content and strategies for all the students with IEP accommodations in class, which can be quite time-consuming, the teachers built in universal strategies during lesson planning. Whether it's removing multiple choice options on tests, providing a copy of class notes to students, or implementing organizational supports, the strategies are designed to support all students in the classroom. One teacher noted that because he has so many students with IEPs, and many of which have such common accommodations, he "might as well provide them to the whole class." These teachers view this approach with the perspective that as much as accommodations benefit students with disabilities, they can also benefit other students without disabilities. One teacher noted that other teachers will argue that providing accommodations to all students "hinders" students without disabilities by giving them "too much of a crutch," but to combat that belief, the teacher states "if it helps a student access learning, then it helps a student access learning."

Students in the focus group feel the effect of this increased workload on the teachers and the resulting time crunch, especially during in-class activities. A few students shared that during class there have been times where they wanted to approach the teacher and seek support or to access an accommodation, but because the teacher was preoccupied it prevented them from seeking help. One of the focus group students stated:

It's when...like...everyone is doing their work or the teacher is talking to the class...and like...sometimes I feel like it's not a good time to approach them. So then I really don't know what to do and then I'll forget about it later and then I won't really get back to it. In the end, sometimes it's really hard to approach a teacher when you feel like they're busy or doing something else.

Several students agreed with this point and even took it a bit further, sharing specific experiences they have had in different classes and with different teachers. One of the focus groups students, who is a student with Autism and has trouble with reading social cues, remembers a few times when he could not determine the best time to speak to a teacher to receive an accommodation, which prolonged the request. Finally, when making the request, the student was told that he needs to “make sure he requests accommodations much earlier.” As I will discuss later in this chapter, communication plays a significant role in the inclusionary classroom for many different reasons. In the end, the focus group students acknowledged that the logistical side of accessing their accommodations, such as when to ask, for example, could vary teacher to teacher and contributed to the overall challenge.

The conversation in the focus group about students not knowing when to approach the teacher ultimately led to the uncovering of another challenge that students see in the inclusionary

classroom; several students explained that several of their teachers did not even know that they had an IEP. Two students had particular accounts:

Student #1: I think it's a recognition thing. I've had teachers that don't even know I have an IEP until I have a really hard test and need more time. I'll ask and they'll say "what?" Maybe it's because I was doing ok in the class but even then I would think they would know [I had an IEP].

Student #2: I've found that when I became disabled, I had to learn a lot of "this is how you advocate for yourself, this is what you need, this is how to talk to the teachers" and then I come to the table, meet with the teacher, and they haven't even read my IEP. Even though I sent it to them weeks in advance and had asked them multiple times in advance, "hey, can you look this over?" And so I definitely feel like they need to come to the table too.

Accounts from the students in the focus group highlight that a teacher not knowing how to implement an accommodation is one thing, but simply not knowing a student has accommodations is another. Hearing that the students are aware of this is indicative that changes need to be made. The consensus among the students in the focus group was that when a teacher is unaware that a student has accommodations, it makes it much more difficult for a student to broach the topic of accommodations and make a request. Students shared that it is even difficult for students with great self-advocacy skills to have the confidence to approach a teacher about something "unexpected" and that many people (even the students themselves), may see as a "favor" or unfair to others. One student pointed out that if a teacher was aware, then the request for an accommodation would not come across as an "inconvenient shock" but more so "expected."

In addition to students acknowledging some of their teachers have been unaware that the student has accommodations, a number of students in the focus group shared (and others agreed) that there have been situations in the past when a teacher “outright does not allow” the use of an accommodation. This comment led me to dig deeper into the matter with the students and clarify what the students experienced. The finding that arose, which was supported by teacher interview comments, is that students and teachers do not seem to be on the “same page” when it comes to the implementation of accommodations. Within this finding, I was able to group the various experiences into two categories.

On one side, students shared that with some teachers, it’s simply a miscommunication, of sorts, or a different interpretation of how/when an accommodation can be implemented. Both students and teachers agreed that this can be tricky and is a “balancing act.” A teacher noted an example of a student over utilizing accommodations to where it became too much of a crutch, leading the student to be “reliant” on the accommodation even though they felt the student was capable of much more. Not knowing where “the line is,” according to another teacher, in terms of the appropriateness of an accommodation causes confusion. When this concern came up in the focus group, one of the students mentioned:

It’s hard to understand as a student when you ask for something which they may or may not give to you, so it would be better for them to tell you what they could do for you in terms of accommodations for their class.

The importance of communication is highlighted by this quote from the student and the preceding example. Teacher to teacher, class by class, exactly what teachers are willing to accept with regard to accommodations can vary. As this student points out, communication between the teacher and student early on and often in the school year about what a teacher can do for a

student can ease any confusion of this type. Another focus group student concluded that the challenge is due to a “lack of collaboration time for the student and teacher,” a time where these interpretations can be worked out.

Friendly misinterpretations, as seen in the above paragraph, can almost be expected with all that is going on in the inclusionary classroom. In a separate category, however, there are teachers, who according to the students, are reluctant to give accommodations due to their personal educational philosophy, “dislike of the student,” or even because of an “authority conflict.” Regarding differing views on educational philosophy, a few students in the focus group shared that some teachers believe education is more than just teaching the content standards; these teachers believe that students must learn skills that will help them in everyday life such as completing assignments on time. Students in the focus group go on to explain that in other classes, teachers could care less about “the little things” and will also be very flexible with due dates and provide alternative routes to be successful as long as you simply demonstrate knowledge of the curriculum. My findings became even more complicated when students expressed that some teachers withhold accommodations due to “dislike of the student” or challenges with an “authority conflict” (e.g. not providing an accommodation even though it’s the law) especially until the student has “proved themselves” and shown that they “care” about the specific class and want to do well. One particular student in the focus went on to express:

So what I think it comes back to is the teacher...they also have an opinion of us. If we aren’t participating in class and really showing effort then they can see that and they don’t really feel like they should be giving us accommodations. If I’m not showing a lot of effort, then why should I get more time or shortened work or other accommodations?

The circumstances under which teachers intentionally do not provide accommodations bring rise to a separate theme within my findings - the need for communication. Many of the challenges noted by students and teachers in my findings are in a way tied to communication, whether it's a miscommunication, lack of communication, or no communication at all. The importance of each participant in the inclusionary classroom seeing eye-to-eye and having a common understanding of accommodations is very important. Likewise, the ability of teachers to hold positive attitudes and prevent personal opinions from interfering with student accessibility is also an important component of the inclusionary classroom, and one I will discuss next in my findings.

Teacher and Student Efficacy/Attitude and the Impact on the Inclusionary Classroom

My findings display that the attitudes and efficacy of both the teachers and the students are critical to successful integration of students with disabilities in the mainstream setting. While no participant in this study explicitly highlighted the importance of teacher/student attitude or efficacy, the implied message was clear and consistent in both the teacher interviews and the student focus group. The need for a positive attitude appeared to be the most significant factor for determining success versus failure in the inclusionary classroom, even outweighing the need for teachers to be knowledgeable in special education practices. It could even be argued that having a positive attitude towards inclusion, and the demands associated with this growing model, is a prerequisite to becoming knowledgeable. Teacher and student efficacy, on the other hand, is more so a result of efforts made by the students and teachers, and builds overtime once successes have been experienced.

Beginning with specific findings from the teachers, the three teachers who partook in the interview had three different backgrounds on special education: one had a wealth of experience throughout his entire life, including preservice training within the credential program and hands-

on experience at a previous school, a second teacher shared that he received training in the preservice credential program, and the third teacher had no education in special education practice before becoming a teacher, but rather learned through “exploration” and “trial and error” over the years of being a teacher. While their experiences varied, what all three of these teachers have in common is a positive attitude towards teaching students with learning challenges and special needs. Indeed, all three of these teachers shared that they have overarching support for students with special needs learning in the mainstream setting. Furthermore, the consensus amongst all three teachers was that they want students from “both ends of the spectrum” (high and low achieving) to be successful and access a curriculum suitable to the students’ needs. As described by one of the teachers, they “have a passion for wanting to bring those kids [students with special needs] into the mainstream setting.” When asked why they were all in favor of students with disabilities learning in the mainstream setting, answers ranged from enjoying the challenge of supporting students with different needs, having a curiosity of the disability itself, and seeing the benefit to the students with disabilities, and the benefit to students without disabilities. Again, while it was never stated, the evidence above is enough to warrant that a positive attitude is certainly a significant factor.

The perspective of the students in the focus group supports the finding above—that if teachers have a positive attitude toward supporting students with disabilities in the inclusionary classroom, then success is soon to come. One of the students shared:

I think the biggest thing is if [the teacher] cares. If they care and they don’t know exactly how to do it [implement an accommodation], then I can work with that and I know we can eventually find a way to figure it out, but if they don’t then there’s nothing I can really do.

This excerpt is a strong implication that a teacher holding a positive attitude is a strong predictor of success in the classroom. Throughout the focus group there were other comments about how students wanted to “feel welcomed” or know that their teacher was aware they had an IEP and was accepting of the accommodations within. A teacher attitude, as implied by the students, goes beyond just the teacher’s ability to implement accommodations, it has also been shown to increase student self-determination. The same student who made the comment above went on to share:

Once I found a teacher that supported me, I found myself thriving in that and just wanting to keep doing that. It’s really amazing when you have a teacher that wants to support you and help you succeed and celebrate your successes.

This student, who recently became diagnosed with a disability, has had a whirlwind of experiences over the past few years and has needed to quickly build the necessary skills to overcome the challenges associated with their disability. Earlier on in the focus group, the student shared experiences with teachers who were not supportive and how this would “bring them down.” Having supportive teachers have built this student’s self-determination to do well and has also built their self-efficacy or, belief in themselves that they can achieve their goals.

The effect of efficacy comes little by little once a student or teacher experiences success in the inclusionary classroom, and once it starts to build, as evidenced by the student excerpt above, it starts to drive itself. For students, efficacy can start to build in multiple ways. A lot of times it is grade-driven, but findings from the focus group indicate it can also happen when a student sees that an accommodation is successful. Experiencing success or relief after accessing an accommodation drove students to want to access the accommodation more often, and per the students, increased their motivation and engagement in a class. Likewise, teacher efficacy

appears to be built off of successful experiences providing accommodations for students and seeing their success in accessing the curriculum. In an interview with one teacher, when I asked about how they became wonderful at supporting students with disabilities, they stated:

Early when I got here I had some really good successes with some students. I taught the only fully blind from birth student to ever go through Mountainside and I was very open to taking mainstream kids and doing everything I could for them, and next thing I knew, I got a lot of them. I went through a lot of years where it was just me being 100% open to having them. Through this process, I kind of got self-taught on modifications and saw how useful this could be for students.

Another teacher highlighted the importance of teachers finding success through smaller accounts. This teacher shared that current teachers who are, in a way, against implementing specific accommodations for whatever reason, could benefit from trying to implement accommodations (in his example he used accommodating assessments) one step at a time, and shared that special education teachers could help ease this process.

Communication - An Avenue to an Effective Inclusionary Classroom

The last major theme that came about in my findings was communication. Communication in the school setting comes in many forms, whether it is teachers communicating with other teachers, teachers communicating home to parents, teachers communicating to students, or vice versa. There are also many modes of communication, whether it's direct, indirect, verbal, nonverbal, whole class, one on one, and so forth. Communication in an inclusionary classroom comes with a whole new set of responsibilities and barriers, and my findings demonstrate that it is critical for all parties to ensure messages are

clear, concise, and bring about a desired outcome. As mentioned in the previous section, students face challenges that discourage communication in their classes (e.g. teachers not being aware they have accommodations), and/or encounter challenges related to their disability that make it difficult to communicate or require constant communication.

To begin, the consensus among the focus group students was that they want to be the ones requesting accommodations from their teachers on an as-needed basis because in the end, they are the ones who know what they need to be successful. The trouble with this finding is that many of these students do not feel comfortable approaching some of their teachers, whether it's due to perceived inconveniences they'd create for the teacher, or the potential for an awkward conversation due to students feeling as if the teacher is not aware they have IEP accommodations or have a history of not always providing accommodations. As mentioned in the focus group, the students "want to feel welcomed" and see that the teacher is "accepting of accommodations." One of the focus group students encapsulated the view of many of the others when he shared:

I think if the teacher presents it in a way where they can come up to you and say, hey, I know you have an IEP and I know about your accommodations, so if you want me to implement anything, like let me know; It shows that they're opening themselves up and making sure that you know that they are interested in helping you.

As I'll discuss more in depth in the next section, it became evident in the focus group session that students are well aware of teacher attitudes, or at the very least develop opinions of the teacher based off of external behaviors the teacher exhibits in the classroom. The students agreed that teachers could diminish the idea that they are unwilling to support students with IEP accommodations by communicating with the student at the start of the year by displaying openness and acknowledging their unique needs.

Students also felt that it would be helpful if teachers created avenues of communication, shared their preferred method for students to communicate, and in some cases even initiated timely conversations on a recurring basis. When discussing policies or systems that teacher interviewees have in their classes for promoting student access to accommodations, a few had some successful examples to share. One teacher found it was helpful to check in with students with special needs on a one to one basis every so often and pose the simple questions, “What do you need from me? How can I make this class a success?” In this case, the teacher initiates the conversation but allows the student to share what they need. Another teacher shared how at the beginning of the year he stresses to all of his students the importance of checking in with him when they have missed class or do not understand something in an assignment. He explained that he explicitly teaches students through role play how they can be better prepared for conversations with teachers, giving them the confidence they need to speak to the teacher effectively. He went on to explain that being proactive in gaining the student perspective on the effectiveness of the class is crucial. In an excerpt from the interview he shares:

Teachers need to ask students because all too often students have a pretty high tolerance and will “suck up” stuff that doesn’t work for them and never tell anyone until you ask. What I do, and this is another blanket thing I say in class, and I know I’m speaking to special education kids but it’s for everybody, I tell them, you guys need to reflect on the past 4-5 weeks as grades are starting to come in, if you ever feel like I’m not meeting your needs, in any way, you need to come to talk to me.

Providing time in class at the start of the year for students to build self-advocacy, and then additional time late in the year to reflect on what is working and what is not, may take up precious instructional time, but can ultimately cut down on challenging scenarios. This ties in

beautifully to the example the student gave in the previous section about not going to speak to teachers about an issue or need for an accommodation because the teacher appears to be busy, and instead, simply “sucking up” the problem. In the end, the consensus among the teachers was that they are here to help students and just need the student to communicate and share what they need.

My findings on the importance of communication also illustrate the desire for students to have time with teachers to collaborate. A majority of the focus group students agreed that short collaboration sessions with teachers would be beneficial to their education as it provides time to review progress, problem solve and thus increase access to their accommodations. Students highlighted the point that ongoing collaboration time with teachers is especially important to problem solve different interpretations of accommodations and how accommodations are best applied to the specific class. Below is an excerpt from the focus group session from two students:

Student #1: I think that it should definitely be a collaboration. I think that because of the way it works you can't just see what's written down in an IEP and perfectly mold the class for that student. So there is a lot of conversations that need to occur about what needs to be implemented for this specific class.

Student #2: Yeah, there definitely needs to be clarifying conversations between the student and the teacher because it happens sometimes where certain accommodations are open to interpretation. Some teachers may view IEPs differently than others. The student should definitely advocate for themselves and as long as the teacher understands that the student is not simply trying to get out of doing work and has the mindset that the student wants to learn and succeed in their class.

Even though both students and teachers agree that there is very little leftover time during class for collaborating and receiving extra help, students feel it is absolutely necessary. Classes are ever-changing, from one unit to another, from reading assignments to large projects, from in-class lectures to self-presentations, and so on. While the variety offered in many classes is wonderful, it also requires both teachers and students to be on the same page and ensure students have access to the different tasks being asked of them.

The collaboration session, according to one student in the focus group, also provides time to build another area related to education: self-determination. This particular student is a student with ADHD, inattentive type, and while he is an extremely bright, articulate student, he lacks the self-determination skills necessary to take his learning into his own hands and do what is needed to achieve above average grades. When presented with the question: “What motivates you to want to do well in school and be a self-determined learner, or in other words someone who will seek their accommodations because they know that will help them access their education?” this student shared:

If I’m being honest, I’ll not be doing good, and then [the teacher] will notice and say something, and then I’m like shoot I got to start doing this, and then I’ll start trying to do whatever I can, like asking for help and seeing if I can use my accommodations, and paying attention.

Frequent collaboration sessions would certainly address this issue and provide students time to receive feedback from their teachers that would drive their self-determination and encourage them to utilize accommodation to achieve higher in their class. This feedback the student would receive, is similar to the feedback the teacher could receive as noted earlier where the student provides feedback to the teacher.

In the end, the findings show that the impact of communication goes a long way. It helps address misunderstandings, keeps students/teachers on the same page, allows for providing constructive feedback for both the teacher and student, and so forth. It is a truly important skill as noted in the excerpt below from a student on the focus group, who feels their communication skills have grown tremendously once she saw how beneficial it could be:

Communicating with teachers is a skill that not everyone has. My friend was having trouble and didn't want to ask for help because she didn't think the teacher would understand. Communication skills that will last us our entire life. During freshman year when I didn't really talk to my teachers about my IEP, there was a disconnect and I didn't do as well. I've noticed that other kids who don't talk to their teacher don't do as well. Now that I talk to my teachers more, I'm doing better. I think a takeaway is that it is important for students to talk with their teachers and they'll see that they are human and want to help students.

This student's account highlights many of the findings shared in this chapter: from the "disconnect" between students and teachers (a challenge in the inclusionary classroom), to the impact of teacher attitude and how it can deter a student from pursuing accommodation, and finally the impact of experienced success due to increased communication.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to pursue the perspective of students on the provision of accommodations in inclusionary classroom. To accomplish this task, the questions provided to the student focus group and in the teacher interviews aimed to collect data on the obstacles that deter students from accessing their accommodations, the environments and qualities of teachers

that foster access to accommodations, and the ways in which students become self-determined learners who can access accommodations independently. In the following sections, the three research sub questions are answered using summaries of the findings presented in this chapter.

What are the obstacles students face within the inclusionary classroom that deter them from accessing their accommodations?

The findings from the student focus group and teacher interviews establish that lack of time in the school day, poor communication between teachers and students, and teacher attitude, are three significant obstacles deterring students from accessing their accommodations. The teachers in the interviews shared how challenging it has become to provide adequate support to the growing number of students with disabilities given the limited time available in the school day. This has had a collateral effect on the students who may hold back on making accommodation requests when they see that their teacher is busy and overwhelmed, as they don't wish to place any more burden on the teacher. This predicament touches on another obstacle—the lack of communication between students and teachers about IEP accommodations. Besides some teachers not even knowing a student has an accommodation plan, there are a number of misinterpretations between the students and teachers on how/when certain accommodations are to be implemented that further limit student access. Finally, the last obstacle addressed by the students is their perceived attitude of the teachers. Students shared that unless a teacher comes across as “welcoming” towards accommodations, then they are likely going to avoid making requests.

What are the environments of the classrooms and qualities of teachers that encourage students to independently access their accommodations?

As mentioned in the previous section, a teacher's attitude plays a major role in either deterring or fostering student access towards IEP accommodations. Students shared that they are more likely to access their accommodations in classes where the teacher is welcoming and flexible in the ways they support the student. Not only did the students share that they feel supported and comfortable in this type of environment but that they become more motivated to learn in the class and access their accommodations more often. Teachers in the interviews indirectly supported this finding from the students—all three teachers glaringly displayed their support for all students and desire to help everyone succeed. One of the other qualities of a successful inclusionary classroom was the provision of universal accommodations where all students have access to accommodations and, if needed, differentiated instruction. One of the teachers acknowledged that he makes sure to build these supports into lesson planning and has even created accommodated tests. The simple willingness to take this extra step is visible to the students and shows that the teacher is open to supporting them.

How does a student acquire self-determination skills necessary to independently access an adequate education?

Lastly, through improved communication with teachers and the opportunity to experience success in the classroom, students can grow their self-determination skills. The findings show, however, that students must first have an opportunity. This can be done through the provision of their accommodations, which enable access to the curriculum. As noted in the prior section, as a student starts to experience success they become more motivated or, self-determined, to continue this success and begin to access accommodations on their own. But having an opportunity is only

part of the equation. Students must also pursue the opportunity and communicate with teachers their desire to access accommodations. Lastly, students must approach the conversation with the mindset that the end result will be positive.

Chapter 5: Implications

Summary of Findings

Student access to IEP accommodations in the high school inclusionary classroom is limited due to a number of reasons. Upon analyzing the qualitative data from this study and findings from other researchers over the years, logistical challenges in the inclusionary classroom, poor communication amongst stakeholders (i.e. teachers, special education teachers, and students), and the efficacy/attitude of both students and teachers create predicaments in the inclusionary classroom that have an effect on student access to their accommodations and thus their education. In this chapter, I will discuss similar findings from the current research and my study, provide new insights for current literature, share implications for current practice in the school environment, and finally, acknowledge limitations of this study and make suggestions for future research.

Both the findings from my study and the review of current literature highlight the growing logistical challenges within the inclusionary setting. This challenge is due to the rising number of students with disabilities access the general education setting. Kozik, Cooney, Vinciguerra, Gradel, and Black (2009) note in their research that teachers at the secondary level face large student caseloads and minimal planning time, along with the added pressure of helping students reach academic proficiency so they are prepared for college. This coincides with findings from my study where even teachers who are wonderful at supporting students with special needs report challenges with finding the time needed to support all students with accommodations. One of the teachers notes that the rise in students with accommodations causes teachers to be “inundated and flooded” to the point where “accommodations can be hard to track.” The increase in accommodations, and thus the increased workload placed on teachers

leads to a lack of time for teachers to meet the individual needs of more and more students. A number of teachers have taken steps to remedy this challenge by employing a strategy in the classroom where they build in “universal accommodations” to their lesson plans and allow all students to access these accommodations.

In addition to the implications associated with an increased teacher workload, teacher interviewees and students from my focus group are discovering that there are different interpretations of accommodations and how/when they should be implemented. Students have shared that there are even circumstances where teachers are unaware a student even has accommodations. This finding is especially critical for student access to their education and sheds light on the communication factor in the inclusionary classroom. Current research makes note of the limited amount of time general education teachers have to communicate with special education teachers and the difficulties this creates (Scruggs et al., 2007); however, what the research does not discuss is that the same can be said for students with disabilities and their general education teachers. Students in my study shared that there is a need for “collaboration time for the student and teacher” in order to talk about misinterpretations and for the student to better understand how “accommodations could be provided in the class.” This collaboration time would also be the ideal place for students and teachers to work together and determine what each participant could be doing better to improve the inclusionary classroom.

Students shared that as important as collaboration time with teachers could be, simple acknowledgment from teachers that a student has an IEP and that they are willing to provide accommodations is even more of a factor than collaboration time for students and teachers. Findings show that some students are hesitant to pursue accommodations due to fears that an accommodation may not be provided when requested. This learned behavior, as my findings

indicate, is a result of past experiences students have encountered when seeking accommodations from teachers who are unwilling to provide accommodations for a variety of reasons. Students acknowledged that some of these reasons include miscommunication, dislike of the student, or even an authority conflict. Regardless of whether or not these reasons are actually true, the point has been determined that students are interpreting some of their teacher's behaviors as unwelcoming towards providing accommodations.

A teacher's unwillingness to provide accommodations is associated with their attitude and beliefs about the inclusionary classroom and students receiving accommodations due to diagnosed disabilities. This finding goes hand in hand with previous research in the literature review where there is ample evidence demonstrating that teachers who hold negative attitudes use successful inclusive instructional strategies less frequently (Cook, 2002). Research from both my findings and current literature, on the other hand, shows that teachers who hold positive attitudes were more open and able to adjust their instruction and curriculum to meet the range of individual needs of students (Swain et al., 2012). Students in the focus group shared that teacher flexibility and willingness to provide accommodations surpasses the need for teachers to be educated in providing accommodations and special education practices. One student shared that teachers simply need to show that they "care," and if they do then the student and teacher can "eventually find a way to figure it out."

Students in the focus group shared that they would like to be the ones requesting accommodations as they are the ones who truly know what they need to access the curriculum. When a teacher in the inclusionary classroom holds a positive attitude, students with disabilities are more motivated to independently request accommodations when needed. So in essence, if a teacher has a positive attitude, students not only access their accommodations more but become

more self-determined students and become an advocate for their own learning. Lastly, as noted in the literature review, self-determined learners self-advocate when they need their accommodations and will problem solve when accommodations are not provided (Hart and Brehm 2013). A few students in the focus group, who can be categorized as self-determined learners, shared that problem solving is needed often and is an important skill, especially given the variety of assignments and day to day irregularities in the school environment.

Implications for the Literature

One of the main gaps in the current literature about student access to accommodations and the inclusionary classroom is the limited perspective from the students themselves. The abundance of current research is based off teacher input and observation and strongly supports the idea that many teachers are overwhelmed, lack the knowledge to effectively teach in an inclusionary classroom, and as a result, develop a negative attitude towards supporting students with disabilities. My findings contribute to the research in a few significant ways, most importantly because it is focused on the students' perspective. First, students have the capability to identify what they need to be successful and therefore can assist the teacher in implementing accommodations, but it was determined that finding time to collaborate is key. Second, while the literature shares that teacher attitude affects a teacher's ability to provide accommodations, it also affects a student's ability to self-advocate and access accommodations.

Students in the focus group shared that they are fully knowledgeable of their IEP accommodations and the reasoning behind their accommodations (i.e. their disability). Because of this, they feel that with some set-aside time to collaborate with teachers, they can identify what they need to access the curriculum and work with the teacher to ensure it is implemented. The key factor, however, is the lack of communication that exists in the inclusionary classroom.

What current research does not account for until now is that students are very hesitant at times to independently pursue their accommodations, even students who are self-determined learners. Whether it's not knowing the best time to approach a teacher during class or the potential of an awkward conversation with a teacher who may not even know a student has an IEP, students have shared that there are certain obstacles that make it difficult to advocate for their own accommodations. While students shared some of the obstacles towards accessing accommodations, they also shared that in some classes the teachers can have a reverse effect and indirectly encourage access to accommodations by displaying a welcoming personality and positive attitude.

A teacher's attitude clearly plays a significant role in the success of an inclusionary classroom, as mentioned in the current literature and findings from teacher interviewees in my study. Much research has identified that a teacher's attitude and their beliefs about the provision of accommodations affect their ability to implement accommodations, but it must now be acknowledged that their attitude also affects a student's ability to self-advocate and make requests for accommodations. Teachers must be aware of the little idiosyncrasies or attitudes they present in class as students are more aware of certain subtleties, such as teacher behaviors, mannerisms, etc., than teachers may recognize.

The literature has shared that teacher attitude and efficacy are significant factors affecting the provision of IEP accommodations, but my research can add to this even more - that factors such as poor teacher attitude, and, many could argue, an outdated or ambivalent teacher philosophy/belief about disabilities/accommodations can impact a student's desire to even attempt to access accommodations. In the end, current research about the challenges teachers experience, their lack of knowledge about IEPs and disabilities, and the effect of negative

attitudes and poor teacher efficacy are abundant, but it has all come from the perspective of teachers. My research shows what a student sees on a daily basis, what they think of their teachers, and how they feel in class when wanting to access their accommodations and be successful as the other kids. This research better allows us educators to understand the obstacles in the inclusionary classroom from the most important perspective of all, that of the student.

One of the main ideas I have come to understand and can contribute to the current literature is that impact of a lack of teacher knowledge and burden these teachers face due to increasing numbers/workload on provision of IEP accommodations can be lessened by implementing a few changes to classroom structure such as building in more communication with students and improved lesson planning that has at least a certain degree of a universal approach. My findings show that by opening up an avenue for student/teacher communication, and more, promoting the communication, it shows that teachers are open to supporting students and can be a simple implementation that takes work off their plate in the long run. With the growing rate of students with disabilities spending less time in the special education classroom and accessing the mainstream setting to learn, it is important for educators to look for more effective ways to meet the needs of all students.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The attitude a teacher displays is much more impactful in a classroom than they may believe. Students see it and feel it every day. Therefore, the first implication for practice is that teachers need to actively demonstrate that they have a positive attitude and show support for students at both ends of the spectrum. While an IEP must be followed according to the law, teachers should want to implement accommodations based on trust that it will help the student access their curriculum. It is nearly impossible for educators to put themselves in the shoes of the

student who wants to succeed but struggles due to their disability. Because of this, it is important for teachers to give students the benefit of doubt and disregard thoughts that the student may be trying to “cheat the system” and use their accommodations as too much of a crutch, a point brought up by the students in the study. Furthermore, it is important for teachers to view a student who has a disability as an opportunity to grow as a teacher and help the student succeed, not as a burden for more work. Developing a more positive attitude may not come naturally, but even attempting to be more open to supporting students with disabilities makes them more approachable and can take work off their plate in the end.

The next implication for practice is for teachers to build communication practices with students with IEPs, or, at the very least, acknowledge the student of having an IEP and let the student know the best ways to access their accommodations. As discovered in the study, students want to access their accommodations when they feel they are needed but experience challenges communicating due to perceived barriers. By being the one to open up an avenue of communication, the teachers can show students they are open to discussion when an accommodation is needed. This can then be built upon by providing ongoing reminders to students over the course of the semester or having scheduled one on one discussions with the students. It is also important for teachers, and students as well, to recognize that communication is not one directional and should not solely occur when students would like to access accommodations. Students expressed in the focus group that collaboration time with teachers can help students understand where they can improve but also be used as a time for teachers to learn what they could be doing better.

At the school-wide level, schools can begin making necessary changes by implementing mandatory professional development workshops at the beginning of the year with a focus on 1)

disability education, especially the most prevalent disabilities within inclusionary classrooms, 2) building student/teacher communication in the classroom, and 3) the effect of teacher attitude. In subsequent workshops, the focus can be more around individualized strategies and even lesson planning techniques that have universal accessibility approach. In addition to professional development at the start of the year and follow-up workshops, instructional teams with special education teachers leading groups can be constructed to help guide teachers through the challenges of implementing inclusive strategies in their classrooms. The focus can be on an assortment of issues with the goal of improving the inclusionary classroom. Lastly, special education departments can play a part and explore ways to help students with IEPs become better self-advocates, communicators, and improve their understanding of their disability and accommodations.

Teachers and schools have the ability to make a direct impact on the effectiveness of the inclusionary classroom, but district and state level agencies have the ability to explore specific changes that can tackle some of the root issues leading to the challenges addressed in this study. For example, classroom size continues to be a topic of discussion, and rightfully so, but it should be explored further through the lens of improving the inclusionary classroom. The length of the school day and amount of support time built into the day is another area that can be monitored and adjusted to meet student need. Both of these topics have a significant effect on the amount of support students receive and time a teacher is provided to take the necessary steps to address student needs.

Altogether, the implications for practice and policy are to improve the educational system and provide greater access for a relatively small percentage of students who simply want to have the same opportunity as others. When students do not have access to their education due to a

disability and a lack in the provision of accommodations, it can be seen as discriminatory as it violates their rights to equal access to education. Bringing further awareness to the effect of disabilities in education and promoting further inclusion into the mainstream setting contributes to social change and betters our society and the lives of people with all kinds of disabilities.

Limitations of the Study

Despite the significant findings this study has provided, limitations are abundant and should be considered to understand the context of the research findings. Whether it's the number/qualities of the research participants, the research methods used, biases of the researcher and participants, or even the effect of the research site, the findings may only cast a small light on the problem at hand. At the very least, however, the findings certainly warrant a need for further research to be conducted.

The most obvious limitation is the small number of students in the focus group and the even smaller group of teacher interviewees. As mentioned in the methods chapter, there were eight students who participated in the focus group and three teachers selected for interviews. Behind the numbers, the participants also had specific characteristics or qualities; for example, the students I selected for the focus group are all 11th or 12th grade students with mild to moderate disabilities and a limited amount of specialized academic support. Likewise, the teachers were hand selected based on their history of being wonderful when working with students with disabilities. The research could have been more well-rounded had I incorporated a greater number of students, students with varying degrees of disabilities, and students at different grade levels. Furthermore, the interviews could have been even more beneficial if they incorporated the perspective of a greater number of teachers, including special education teachers and teachers who may experience difficulties working with students with disabilities.

Utilizing other research methods is also an avenue to explore in subsequent studies. While interviews and focus groups have the capability to capture quality data, looking back I believe observations of teachers, students, and classes as a whole would have elicited useful data for this particular research question. One area in particular where I felt I was limited, was gathering the perspective of students in the focus group. The data I was able to collect was valuable but at the end of the session I found myself yearning for more information that I knew a few students could provide. With more time to complete this study, I believe follow up interviews would have been the method of choice to gather the necessary data.

Specific biases were also present in this study that may have had varying effects on the findings. The first bias involved the students in the focus group. As mentioned before, these students are all upperclassmen and have relatively mild disabilities compared to other students with disabilities. Furthermore, some of these students are also relatively high achieving while all of them are grade-driven and have aspirations of attending college. Because of this, some of their reflections and comment about issues they encountered may be biased due to past experiences with teachers who followed the IEP, implemented accommodations, but did not issue the grade the student was looking to achieve solely based off of performance. My research site also plays a very important role in my findings. The population at my school is predominantly white middle to upper class students with a very high graduation rate and a similarly high number of college-bound students. This amounts to a culture of academic rigor with a high degree of competitiveness to earn the best grades possible. There is also a (self-perceived) higher than average rate of parent involvement at my research site, many of whom have financial resources to pay for private assessments; this results in a high issuance of 504 Plans, and parent-driven special education assessment requests, ultimately resulting in a large number of kids with

accommodation plans. Because of all of the above, this could impact the behaviors of the teachers found in my research (e.g. overwhelmed-feeling, choosing not to provide accommodations at times, little time to communicate).

Lastly, there may have also been researcher biases. Given my beliefs about accommodations there may have been times where I heard what I wanted to hear. I knew going into the research that I would likely find challenges with implementing accommodations and this may have led me to focus more on this issue. Upon hearing myself ask a few focus group questions, out of the many, I sense that I may have asked them in a way that gave a hint towards what I was hoping the students would say. The same is true during the interviews, where specific follow up questions may have indicated to the teacher what I was looking for them to say.

After conducting the research, I feel as if more needs to be understood about why some general education teachers, many of which are great teachers by many respects, outright refuse to provide some students IEP accommodations. Do they feel as if it's unfair to other students or to their teaching and neglect the fact that the student has a disability affecting their learning? Do they feel, and if so how strongly, that a student is capable despite having a disability and is simply working the system? Because the student population that I focused on in this study—students with mild to moderate disabilities—do not often exhibit physical qualities of their disability, do teachers not believe or understand the extent of how the student's disability affects them? More research is needed to further understand this phenomenon. There is a wide range of personalities and beliefs of teachers, and further focus on how teachers formulate the attitudes they have with respect to educating students with disabilities is important to understand in order to improve the inclusionary classroom.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

How does your disability make it challenging for you to learn in the general education classroom?

What accommodations are you entitled to in the general education classroom?

Do you feel as if your accommodations are something you should ask for in your classes or something your teachers should automatically implement, or both? Talk about your understanding on whose role this is/should be?

Do you ever request accommodations, other than extra time, in your classes? *Example: Maybe to have an assignment shortened or questions on a test be read out loud?*

Can you provide one example of a time your general education teachers noticeably implemented an accommodation for you without a request from me [your case manager] or you? Explain?

Can you provide one example of a time you wanted an accommodation in your general education classroom but did not have one?

What specific qualities in your classes, may it be your teacher, the environment, the subject, or other, that encourage you to access accommodations in your GE classes?

What specific qualities in your classes, may it be your teacher, the environment, the subject, or other, that present obstacles that discourage you to access your accommodations in your GE classes?

Appendix B: Teacher Interview Questions

To get us going, what are your thoughts on students with special education needs learning in the general education setting? In your opinion what are the challenges/negatives (if any) and what are the benefits?

Can you provide a brief background on your experiences working with students with disabilities, and how you've learned to accommodate them and understand their needs? (e.g. pre service training, professional development, specific "in practice" experiences)

Tell me about some successful and/or positive experiences you have had implementing accommodations in your classes?

What are some accommodations you find are easily provided in your classes? Why are/were these easy for you to implement?

What are some accommodations you find are particularly difficult to implement? Why are/were these accommodations challenging to implement?

What are some strategies you have implemented to overcome challenges in implementing accommodations for students?

What kind of system/policy do you have in place for students to independently access their accommodations? (For example, do you remind students daily or after a project is presented if they would like to use an accommodation?)

Have you ever implemented a policy in your class with the goal of teaching students with special needs how to advocate for themselves?

Lastly, what can students with disabilities do better to improve their access to accommodations in your class?



December 3, 2018

Whitney Long
50 Acacia Avenue
San Rafael, CA 94901

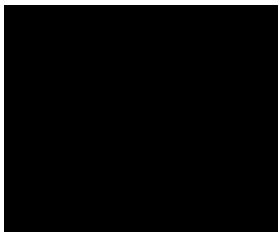
Dear Whitney,

On behalf of the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants, I am pleased to inform you that your proposal entitled *Student Perspective of Accessing Accommodations in General Education Classroom* (IRBPHP application #10723) has been approved.

In your final report or paper please indicate that your project was approved by the IRBPHP and indicate the identification number.

I wish you well in your very interesting research effort.

Sincerely,



Chair, IRBPHP